

The Hall of Justice – Under Water
By Chris Miller
Los Angeles Sheriffs' Museum

The Hall of Justice in downtown Los Angeles was built in 1925. This was the nation's first consolidated judicial facility. It housed the Sheriff's Department, Coroner, District Attorney, Public Defender and Tax Collector. At that time, the needs of the Sheriff's Department were not as great as they are today. The 14 story Hall of Justice contained 17 courtrooms for trials and over 750 cells to house inmates. Having a building with a jail in the top five floors and the Coroner's Office in the basement was not without its problems.

Anyone who worked in the Hall of Justice while the jail was open will tell you the nightmares of water coming through their ceiling as inmates in the discipline module on the 13th floor stopped up their toilets and continually flushed them. The jail stairwells located in the center of the floor were turned into waterfalls. The water continued to flow until the water to each of the inmate's toilets was shut off. By then, so much water had flowed down the stairs that it could not be cleaned up before it flowed through the ceilings of all the floors below. Several hours after the flood occurred, the Hall of Justice Jail would receive calls from the second floor asking to shut off the water that was flowing through their ceiling. By then it was too late to stop, the water had flowed through the ceilings and floors of all 11 floors in between.

In 1975, I was a module officer in the Hall of Justice Jail. When inmates flooded their cells, I would enter the pipe chase behind their cells to turn off the water to each toilet. After the water had been turned off for a few hours, the inmates would begin complaining that they couldn't flush their toilets after using it. The senior deputy would order me to turn on the water and when I did, the inmates began flooding all over again. I found a solution that was not convenient, but it did work. I would keep the water turned off in discipline module 1353. Every hour I would tell the inmates that I was going to go behind their cell and turn on the water. When I did, I would bang on the rear cell wall so they could flush their toilet. After they flushed it, I turned the water back off and moved to the next cell to repeat the process.

I have talked to department personnel who worked in the Hall of Justice on the floors below the jail and who had water flow through their ceilings over the years. They had to keep the top of their desk clear of paperwork that would become water damaged if it remained there when flooding occurred.

Another problem with the Hall of Justice occurred because the Coroner's Office was located in the basement. Normally, this wouldn't be a problem, but when a decomposing body was brought in the odor would permeate through the upper floors. This did not create a welcoming work environment.

When the Hall of Justice reopens at the end of this year, these issues will no longer be a problem. The jail cells have been removed and the Coroner's Office was relocated in 1971 and will not be returning.

The Los Angeles Sheriffs' Museum is creating a Hall of Justice Museum on the building's first floor. This museum will allow visitors to take photographs of themselves inside an actual row of jail cells that was moved from the 10th floor. Visitors will also be taken on a visual tour of the Hall of Justice history through a display of photographs.

If you want to learn more about the reconstruction of the Hall of Justice and its history, visit the "Los Angeles County Sheriffs' Museum" Facebook page, or the Museum's website.

If you have documents, stories or memorabilia relating to the history of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department that you would like to share with the Sheriffs' Museum, contact Chris Miller at cmiller@lasd.org